

CHRISTIAN radio

TRIES TO DIAL IN ITS PRIMARY AUDIENCE

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY

“Christian radio has always been an extension of the core mission of the church: to reach out beyond the four walls and carry the good news of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ to the world around us.”

— Frank Wright

Depending on whom you ask, Christian radio is either the hottest trend in broadcasting or an antiquated approach to communicating to the masses.

“Christian radio has always been an extension of the core mission of the church: to reach out beyond the four walls and carry the good news of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ to the world around us,” says Frank Wright, president of Manassas, Va.-based National Religious Broadcasters.

“The uniqueness of Christian radio is that it can bring truth that transforms lives by calling people to focus on things eternal.”

The primary goal of individual stations varies, whether it’s to evangelize, to inform or to entertain. Wright believes recently some stations have added an emphasis: to alert churches of the need to reform. “Much on radio is calling the church back to its historical biblical principles and commitments,” Wright says.

Janet Parshall, who has hosted the three-hour *Janet Parshall’s America* for 13 years from

Washington, D.C., says radio can present a pre-evangelistic approach that creates a desire to attend church.

“We aren’t called to supplant church, but to walk listeners to church so that they can’t wait for Sunday to come,” Parshall says.

Yet NRB, citing research by The Barna Group last year, notes that more Americans listen to Christian radio “at least once a month” (46 percent) than attend church in any given week (40 percent). According to Barna, 28 percent of the audience are non-Christians.

Conceivably, someone hearing an Amy Grant song on a secular adult contemporary station or Payable on Death on a rock station might consider it Christian radio. Barna also claims one out of every six American adults listens to Christian radio every day.

The Illinois District of the Assemblies of God operates five radio stations in the state. Barry Copeland, network director of New Life Radio, believes the medium can edify Christians and evangelize non-Christians

simultaneously. He says 40 percent of the network’s audience is unchurched.

“Christian radio gives people a way to look over the fence and check out what Christianity is all about,” Copeland says. “Our hope is to be a bridge to the church. We’re all about encouraging people, wherever they are on their spiritual journey.”

In a society that is increasingly secularized, the unchurched often are uncomfortable seeking spiritual help elsewhere. Last year, the five Illinois AG radio stations received more than 12,000 unsolicited requests for prayer from listeners, Copeland says.

Perry Atkinson, president and general manager at KDOV Radio 91.7 FM in Medford, Ore., occasionally officiates at a funeral of someone whose only connection with Christianity had been his voice over a microphone.

“Radio is a private medium that can minister to people no matter where they are,” Atkinson says. “But there is a danger that people who are burned out or discouraged will use radio as a substitute for church.”

AUDIENCE CONNECTION

Early morning is considered primetime in radio. From 6:30 to 8 a.m. every weekday, Atkinson is the on-air host of a KDOV news program that features local sports, weather and business information. From 8 to 9, discussion focuses on a wide range of topics, from health to politics.

“The issues we wrestle with all have a spiritual base,” says Atkinson, who has been at the station for 23 years. “Our job is to bring the biblical view to the listener.”

Atkinson’s approach of providing relevant information pertaining to the community is atypical for Christian radio, but it may be a necessary future component if local stations hope to survive the crowded airwaves.

Nearly one-third of KDOV’s listeners are non-Christian, Atkinson says. “They are looking for hope and a different worldview,” Atkinson says. “I look at our news as a fishnet. We hope they will listen to the other programs we have to offer once they start listening to the news.”

Programs reaching non-Christians on a national scale include Parshall’s weekday afternoon talk show on 160 stations, plus XM satellite radio.

insurgency — through a biblical grid. As Atkinson does on a local level, Parshall casts a fishing line with topics such as nutrition and fashion as bait. She strives to deliver truth in a loving fashion and engage non-Christian callers, even angry ones, in meaningful conversation.

STATIONS MULTIPLY

According to an Arbitron study released last year, there are 13,838 radio stations in the country, and 2,014 of them are religious, accounting for 14.5 percent of stops along the dial. Only news/talk and country have a slight edge in total number of stations.

Wright notes that the booming



Janet Parshall has filled a niche broadcasting from Washington, D.C.

“People who might never walk into a sanctuary find themselves listening to the values and teachings being espoused,” Parshall says. “They don’t feel threatened that they will be different from everyone else in the room.”

Parshall tries to examine what is happening in the world — from welfare reform to Iraqi

number of new all-music stations has caused Christian radio to be the fastest-growing segment of the entire industry. The number of Christian contemporary stations grew from 367 in 1993 to nearly 600 now, according to a MindSpin Research study.

An Arbitron report released in February says specifically contemporary Christian music



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station listeners are more likely to be married (70.7 percent), Republican (44.5 percent) and car listeners (47.7 percent) than audiences of the other 14 formats measured.

However, total audience share for all Christian stations, according to Arbitron ratings, is around 3 percent, below formats such as alternative, oldies, rock, urban and Spanish.

According to last year’s study, women account for 64.6 percent of all Christian station listeners, the highest ratio for any of 13 formats studied. The portion of listeners 65 or older (17.3 percent) is higher than any format except adult standards, classical and new adult contemporary.

Assemblies of God executive presbyter and broadcaster C. Dan Betzer doesn’t believe Christian radio is keeping pace with technological and cultural changes.

“We use language for the most part that nobody out in the world understands,” says Betzer. “We need to learn how to communicate effectively — not changing the message, but how to apply it. Christian broadcasters can learn a lot about being relevant and interesting just by watching Super Bowl commercials.”

Betzer, who is senior pastor of First Assembly in Fort Myers, Fla., says many Christian stations ignore local events. “News on most Christian stations — if they tell you what’s going on — is rehashed from somebody else’s news department,” Betzer says. “Radio is a local medium. If we’re going to get the locals to listen to it, it has to be local in content.”

FORSAKING THE GOSPEL?

Former Christian radio station manager and program manager Stephen Winzenburg now manages a station at Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa, where he is a communications professor.

“Most Christian stations want to reach the unsaved and that’s a wonderful goal,” Winzenburg says. “But the reality is, most non-Christians won’t stop at a Christian station to listen. They think it’s bland.”

The result, Winzenburg fears, is that some contemporary Christian music stations are compromising the message, including playing songs with ambiguous lyrics that fail to define whether the singer is directing love to God or a human companion.

“A lot of contemporary Christian stations don’t mention God on the air, they don’t preach, they don’t pray and the music has a weak message,” Winzenburg says. “They aren’t fully communicating the gospel.”

Winzenburg believes Christian radio has a split personality. “Some stations almost seem to want to hide from their association with traditional, evangelical Christianity,” he says. “At times Christian radio tries to be too broad in its marketing.”

Wright, however, is fine with the big tent approach. “The goal is to connect with the audience in such a way as to keep them regularly listening,” he says. “That doesn’t mean every program has to have a sermon or altar call.”

FUTURE CHALLENGES

What Christian radio has going for it is safe content for the entire

family, a quality increasingly tough to find in the mainstream market.

“Christian radio can offer encouragement, hope, positive messages, and comforting music and talk,” Winzenburg says.

However, as technology continues to evolve, stations operating on a tight budget may find staying on the air difficult.

“I’ve seen the world go from reel-to-reel tape to eight tracks to cassettes to minidisks to MP3 to flash recorders,” Parshall says. “We have to be part of whatever new technology there is as a conduit of information with an eternal message.”

The presence of specialized satellite radio channels will further fragment radio’s audience, the same way cable channels impacted broadcast television. Automakers are factory-installing

Sirius or XM satellite radios in many models, offering more than 125 channels of music, news, talk and sports.

Another subscription-based service called iRadio, combining elements of satellite radio and portable music players, is on the horizon. Among the 435 choices will be channels dedicated exclusively to performers such as Shania Twain and Vince Gill, plus four commercial-free worship stations.

To compete, Christian stations likely will have to beef up what satellite radio can’t provide: local coverage of news, public affairs and sports.

Another uncertain future factor hinges on listener funding. Most Christian radio stations are listener-supported nonprofits — and many younger listeners aren’t

motivated to write a monthly pledge check.

“We are facing an aging donor base and giving patterns of the generations following that are not the same as those preceding,” Wright says.

But whatever its foibles, Christian radio has an edge over all other formats: content with eternal ramifications.

“It’s not just about entertainment or information,” Parshall says. “With what we do every day there hangs in the balance the reality that somebody’s life could be changed forever. I don’t ever want to be sloppy with this commodity known as airtime.” **tpe**

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